

WOODCUTS FROM DER WEISSKUNIG

At the beginning of the 16th century Emperor Maximilian I of Austria engaged a group of artists to design woodcuts for an autobiography. Foremost among them was Hans Burgkmair the Elder; the others were Leonhard Beck, Hans Springinklee, and Hans Schaufelein. The work, DER WEISSKUNIG, was to be a printed picture book recording the history of Maximilian's ancestors, his birth and education, and the events of his reign. Unfortunately, the Emperor died before the book was ready for publication.

In the 18th century 223 of the woodblocks for DER WEISSKUNIG were discovered in Vienna and in 1775 were printed in book form. However, thirteen of the original woodblocks had been lost, and their subjects are known only through a few proof impressions originally printed in the 16th century.

Woodcut proof impressions taken from seven of the lost thirteen woodblocks have recently been acquired for the Dudley P. Allen Collection. Their accession is an important addition not only to the Museum's material relating to the Emperor Maximilian I,¹ but also to the Museum's group of prints by Hans Burgkmair.²

Five of the Cleveland woodcuts from DER WEISSKUNIG, all signed with the initials H. B., are by Hans Burgkmair;³ the other two subjects, the joust (Fig.) and the "Battle Against the Blue Company," (Fig.) are attributed to Leonhard Beck.⁴ Burgkmair designed almost half the woodcuts for DER WEISSKUNIG, and proved to be a particularly imaginative and versatile interpreter of the Emperor's narrative. Interesting as it is to have Maximilian's written autobiography - no matter how romanticized - we can be doubly glad that he conceived of his publication as a great picture book, for it is the illustrations which give a true insight into life in north Europe as it looks backward to the Middle Ages and moves forward into the Renaissance. Even in so small a sampling as these seven well preserved pages, the

clamor and fascinating machinery of the battlefield and the pageantry and intrigue of the court spring freshly to life.

Although DER WEISSKUNIG was never published as the Emperor had intended, a record was left in a few bound volumes⁵ containing notes and parts of the text in manuscript, and many of the woodcut proofs, and outline drawings for projected illustrations. With the assistance of these sources a published edition of DER WEISSKUNIG finally appeared in 1888.⁶ Illustrations were printed from the original woodblocks (from zinc etchings in the case of the thirteen lost blocks), and the text was compiled from the various manuscripts. With the help of this final publication we have a clue to the subjects of the seven Cleveland woodcuts.

The WEISSKUNIG or "White King" of the title is, of course, Maximilian himself, and the "Old White King" is Maximilian's father the Emperor Frederick III. In this fashion all the individuals and countries mentioned in the narrative are given fictitious names. The first woodcut in our group - a prelude to the birth of Maximilian - immediately sets the tone of the book as massive propaganda for the glory of the house of Hapsburg.

THE BANISHED DUKE OF OTHOP. The Duke of Otnop (the Voivode Nicholas Ujlaki of Siebenburgen) came to the court of the Old White King to complain of having been driven from his own land by the Turks. "And when he came to the end of his sad and stirring tale, he heard that the Queen was pregnant and he spoke: 'My heart is lifted and my mind tells me that by the grace of the Almighty, I dare hope that the child in the womb of the Queen may revenge me through God's grace in our belief.' At these words the child stirred for the first time to the joy of the foreign ruler for the child's stirring confirmed in his heart the truth of his prediction, and he remained with the Old White King until the child was born."⁷

THE ART OF JOUSTING AND TILTING. "After the young White King had learned well how to fence afoot and on horseback... he began to learn all about tournaments and he found that one who wanted to become famous in tournaments had not only to know

how to do it, but actually do it. Very soon the young King understood the real concept of the knightly tournaments... and he won many a prize. And when he had grown to manhood he... outdid everyone by his skill and handling of his lance. He also was the first one to introduce in his Kingdom the 'joust' (lancing on horse-back across barriers)... His court was known for these knightly games all over the world and many kings, princes, counts, and other nobles and knights would come to the White King's court to enter in the games."

HOW THE FRENCH KING MADE WAR ON THE KING OF FEUEREISEN (DUKE OF BURGUNDY) ... and HOW THE KING OF FEUEREISEN DIED IN THE BATTLE. "When the King of Feuereisen was at war with the Old White King, the French King gathered all his military ... and together with all the princes and nobles belonging to the Old White King he made an alliance against the King of Feuereisen.... And all of them together with the Swiss fought against the King of Feuereisen and in three fierce battles they were victorious. One took place at Granson, one at Morta, and the third at Nancy, and it was in the third battle that the King of Feuereisen was killed (January 7, 1477)... The King of Feuereisen left behind his wife and only one legitimate daughter, otherwise no children." This event is of great significance, not for the victory at Nancy, but because of the existence of the daughter-heiress, Mary of Burguncy, whom Maximilian married on August 28 of the same year, beginning the sequence of brilliant family marriages which more than any battlefield victories assured the Hapsburg dynasty of the powerful role it was to play in the 17th century.

THE BAD ADVICE OF ONE LITTLE MAN TO ANOTHER. The Incident is not identified, and the only clue is a notation on a sketch for the subject in the Vienna National Library⁸ which in a reference to the costumes indicates that some of the men are Flemish.

THE SIEGE OF PADUA⁹ and THE STORMING OF NANTES. Both woodcuts illustrate besieged cities, two of the innumerable campaigns of which DER WEISSKUNIG treats.

"How a good many small cities again deserted the young White King and how he punished them for it. After the White King's conquest and occupation, many cities may not have been pleased, and there were some who deserted the White King and joined the King of Fish (Doge of Venice). Whereupon the White King gathered his army to fight these deserters and won over them. He also reconquered many of their towns and castles and killed the treacherous people therein and plundered their towns, and he ordered the farmers who were against him to be killed, to perish and burn, and punished them for their treason, as was necessary."

THE BATTLE AGAINST THE BLUE COMPANY (FRENCH). The White King helped the Blue King (King of France) to win the battle against the King of the Fish (Doge of Venice) which added land to his power. He was so exuberant over his success that he went and bribed the Gray Company (Dutch) into an alliance against the White King. That made the latter furious and he "demanded from the Blue King the return of his soldiers whom he had lent to him and made a treaty with the Society of Many Colors (Swiss) against the Blue King and drove him from the territory which he had conquered with the White King's help and the White King gave this land to the young King of Worm (Duke of Milan) who was his relative."